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AUTHOR Morrow, John E.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

One thousand two hundred-forty-one elementary, 459 middle, and 597 high school teachers and their supervisors and principals (N=93), (N=56), and (N=60), respectively, from 53 elementary, 16 middle and 15 high schools located in a large urban district in the Southeast were surveyed to determine: (1) instructional problems reported by teachers; (2) instructional problems of teachers reported by their supervising principals; and (3) differences in perceptions of instructional problems between the groups. Teachers and principals at all levels generally cited individual differences, motivation, discipline, and testing and grading among the top five concerns. Teachers also cited classroom management as a problem area. Ranking of these top five problem areas, however, differed significantly between teachers and principals, and also among the different grade levels of teachers and principals. In general, teachers did not perceive themselves as having great difficulty with any of the instructional problem areas, nor were they perceived by their supervisors as having great difficulty. The problem areas ranked as least difficult by both teachers and principals were all within the realm of professional knowledge and skill. Both groups appeared to believe that teachers were sufficiently well-prepared in their subject area to teach successfully. (CB)

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EDUCATIONAL REFORM:

PERCEPTIONS OF PRACTITIONERS

John E. Morrow
Carolyn P. Casteel
Bess A. Isom

University of South Alabama
Mobile, Alabama

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Educational Reform: Perceptions of Practitioners

Introduction

As a result of the educational reform movement, teacher preparation programs have been scrutinized and sharply criticized for lack of academic rigor. A number of commissions and committee reports sponsored by various educational organizations have been published in recent years, each giving attention to restoring excellence in education by recommending "stronger" teacher education programs. The trend has been to suggest changes which would increase requirements for scholarly accomplishment in the academic disciplines and reduce emphasis on pedagogy.

The Carnegie Report (1983) cites programs in teacher education as inadequate and concludes that there are "serious problems" with teacher preparation programs. There is a clear implication in the report that education courses are inadequate and are too numerous while training in an academic discipline has not received sufficient emphasis (Boyer, 1983).

The National Commission on Excellence in Education recommends that persons preparing to enter teaching be required to meet high standards, with emphasis on demonstrating competence in an academic discipline. Bell (1983) claims that teachers need to know how to teach, but that this is not the main priority. He has emphasized that teacher

preparation programs must produce teachers who are literate, articulate, and well-grounded in the liberal arts. According to Bell (1983), "to sacrifice this mastery of substance in order to make room for pedagogy is to produce a teacher with all the teaching techniques--a rich bag of tricks, if you please--and little scholarly substance."

Some state and local school systems have responded to these and other recommendations by changing certification requirements for entry into teaching. The New York Board of Education, for example, abolished professional education course requirements altogether as a certification standard. The change was made, according to Mr. Edward P. Aquilone, director of the system's personnel division, to improve the quality of people coming into it (i.e., teaching) (Toch, 1984).

A recent report by the Southern Region Education Board cited declining enrollments in teacher education programs as evidence of lack of interest in entering teaching by current students. The Board's 1981 report on teacher education recommended modification of entrance standards to allow liberal arts graduates to enter teaching directly. The report also included recommendations of other groups which cite the shortage of mathematics and science teachers as justification for certifying liberal arts graduates in these fields (SREB Report, 1984).

States such as California, Florida, and Virginia have adopted certification plans that allow, at least temporarily, entry into teaching by liberal arts graduates. Again, the rationale proposed is to enhance the quality of incoming teachers and to remedy teacher shortages in areas such as mathematics and science (SREB Report, 1984).

The reform theme aimed at reducing or eliminating professional education preparation (Cooperman & Klogholz, 1985) seems incongruous with the research on teacher effectiveness. Such research recognizes the importance of subject matter knowledge but typically identifies issues such as time-on-task, diagnosis of student needs, organizing instruction, monitoring student work, discipline, and use of varied teaching strategies as crucial for effective schools and teachers (Hersh, 1982).

Furthermore, an important source of data--the practitioners themselves--appears to be overlooked when reform recommendations are compiled. Do practitioners' perceptions of problems faced in today's classrooms agree with what is proposed in the reports on educational reform? Do they agree that increasing subject matter competence is a major factor in improving their practice? Are the instructional problems of classroom teachers essentially a result of deficiencies in knowledge of subject matter? Will strengthening the subject matter competencies of teachers resolve all or most of their teaching problems?

In an attempt to answer these questions, elementary, middle, and high school teachers and their supervising principals were surveyed to determine:

1. The instructional problems reported by teachers.

2. The instructional problems of teachers reported by their supervising principals.

3. The differences in perceptions of instrucitonal problems among the groups.

The problems reported offer valuable information about the areas in the education of teacher which should receive additional emphasis.

Method

Subjects

Subjects for this study included 1,241 elementary, 459 middle, and 597 high school teachers. Supervising principals (principals, assistant principals, and curriculum supervisors) included 93 elementary, 56 middle, and 60 at the high school level. All schools (53 elementary, 16 middle, and 15 high schools) were located in a large urban district in the southeast.

Procedure

A review of related literature identified the most common instructional problems of classroom teachers (Adams & Martray, 1980; Adams, 1982; Bartholemew, 1974; Cruickshank, 1974). These problem areas were listed

in random order on a survey instrument and administered to supervising principals, and elementary, middle, and high school teachers. The survey instrument included the following items:

1. Discipline, classroom control
2. Selecting and utilizing appropriate teaching methods
3. Selecting appropriate subject matter
4. Motivation, getting students interested
5. Interaction, communication with students
6. Testing, grading, and promotion of students
7. Knowledge of subject matter to be taught
8. Organizing and managing the classroom
9. Development and use of instructional materials
10. Providing for individual differences among students

Teachers were asked to rate the level of difficulty they experience for each instructional problem area, using a Likert scale with 1 as No Difficulty and 5 as Great Difficulty. Supervising principals were asked to rate the difficulty of the instructional problem areas for teachers under their supervision, using the same Likert scale.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the rankings of instructional problems reported by 93 elementary, 56 middle school, and 60 high school supervising principals.

The ranks were determined by calculating the median of the responses of each group for each instructional problem area.

Principals at all levels viewed the instructional problems of teachers in much the same way for the "top five" concerns. Elementary and middle school principals perceived "Providing for Individual Differences Among Students" as the number one problem of teachers under their supervision; high school principals ranked the area second. High school principals reported "Motivation, Getting Students Interested" as the area of most difficulty; elementary and middle school principals ranked the area second. All groups rated "Discipline, Classroom Control" third. The greatest disparity in perception concerned "Testing, Grading and Promotion of Students." Elementary and high school principals ranked this problem area fifth and fourth, respectively, while middle school principals ranked the area eighth.

Supervising principals also evidenced much agreement concerning the "bottom five" instructional problem areas. All groups reported "Knowledge of Subject Matter to be Taught" and "Selecting Appropriate Subject Matter" as areas of least difficulty for teachers under their supervision. The greatest difference in perception involved "Interaction, Communication with Students." Elementary and high school principals

ranked this problem area eighth and seventh, respectively, while middle school principals ranked the area fifth.

Table 2 presents the ranking of instructional problems reported by 1,241 elementary, 459 middle, and 597 high school teachers. Teachers at all levels held similar views of the top five concerns. Elementary teachers considered "Providing for Individual Differences Among Students" as their number one problem. Middle and high school teachers ranked this second and identified "Motivation, Getting Students Interested" as their number one concern. Elementary teachers rated motivation third. "Discipline, Classroom Control" ranked second among elementary teachers and third among middle and high school teachers. "Testing, Grading and Promotion of Students" and "Development and Use of Instruction Materials" were ranked fourth and fifth respectively by all three groups.

There was also agreement among teachers concerning the "bottom five" instructional problem areas. Teachers at all three levels ranked "Selecting Appropriate Subject Matter" ninth and "Knowledge of Subject Matter to be Taught" tenth. Perceptions varied most for "Interaction, Communication with Students." Middle and high school teachers ranked this sixth while elementary teachers ranked it eighth.

Table 3 provides a comparison of perceptions of all principals with those of all teachers. The problem areas falling into the top five rankings

and those occurring in the bottom five were the same with one exception. Teachers ranked "Preparation and Use of Instrucitonal Materials" fifth while principals ranked it seventh. The problem area principals perceived as ranking fifth was "Organizing and Managing the Classroom."

In addition to analyzing the rankings of the ten instructional problem areas, the Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure was employed to determine the significance of the differences in perception of difficulty among the groups of teachers and supervising principals. An alpha level of .05 was selected.

The analysis indicated that elementary, middle, and high school supervising principals differed significantly in their perception of difficulty for four of the instructional problem areas. High school principals perceived teachers under their supervision as having more difficulty with "Motivation, Getting Students Interested," "Providing for Individual Differences Among Students" and "Selecting Appropriate Subject Matter" than either elementary or middle school principals. Elementary school principals reported a lower level of difficulty for "Interaction, Communication with Students" than the other principals reported.

Teachers differed significantly in their perception of difficulty for four of the instructional problem areas. Elementary teachers had less difficulty than the other teachers with "Motivation, Getting Students Interested" and

with "Interaction Communication with Students." High school teachers reported less difficulty in "Discipline, Classroom Control" than elementary and middle school teachers.

Conclusions

Teachers participating in the study did not perceive themselves as having great difficulty with the instructional problem areas surveyed nor were they perceived by their supervising principals as having undue difficulty. This is evidenced by the low median Likert scores. However, the problem areas ranked highest by both principals and teachers were all areas within the realm of professional knowledge and skill.

Teachers and principals perceived "Selection of Subject Matter" and "Knowledge of Subject Matter" to be areas of least difficulty for teachers. The difficulty levels reported for these instructional problem areas approached the No Difficulty level on the five-point Likert scale. Apparently, in the judgment of the teachers and principals, knowledge of subject matter is not a significant problem. Teachers tend to identify problem areas such as motivation, classroom management, discipline, and teaching methods as creating more instructional problems than do subject matter concerns. Supervisors of teachers agree with these findings in their assessments. Both groups apparently believe that teachers are sufficiently well-prepared in their subject area to teach successfully.

The instructional problems identified as causing the most difficulty for teachers in this study involved areas of professional knowledge and skill rather than knowledge of subject matter. Strengthening the subject matter competencies of the teachers would not resolve their teaching problems, nor would it lead necessarily to improved teaching effectiveness.

Findings from effective teacher research confirm the importance of knowledge of the subject being taught as one of the characteristics that correlate positively with improving learner outcomes. However, the professional competencies addressed in this study have also been identified by teacher effects research as correlating positively with achievement gains in the classroom. These are the competencies that comprise the substance of professional education courses. This suggests a more balanced approach to calls for reform in teacher education and professional certification.

National commissions and groups accepting responsibility for studying school improvement should be held to no less rigorous standards of inquiry than those required of any legitimate researcher. Conclusions and recommendations for improvement should be based on the best scientific research available, not on preconceived notions, personal bias, or "quick-fix" solutions. The research literature over the past forty years chronicles the need for balance between subject matter content and

professional studies in the education of teachers (Hill, 1944). Professional educators must assume responsibility for making this literature available to interested groups.

Rather than assuming a defensive or adversarial posture with the national groups, professional educators must work to develop more cooperative efforts to insure that recommended changes in the education and certification of teachers are based on evidence from research. Failure to assume this responsibility most surely will result in a system of public schools less responsive to the needs of students they serve.

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Table 1

PRINCIPALS

Perceptions of Teachers' Instructional Problems

Problem Areas	Elementary N = 93 MD.	Rank	Middle N = 56 MD.	Rank	High N = 60 MD.	Rank	P value
TOP FIVE							
Individual Differences	2.16	1	2.26	1	2.54	2	.03*
Motivation	2.15	2	2.40	2	3.32	1	.01*
Discipline	1.97	3	2.12	3	2.02	3	.20
Managing Classroom	1.86	4	1.97	4	1.98	5	.58
Testing, Grading	1.80	5	1.48	8	2.00	4	.08
BOTTOM FIVE							
Instructional Materials	1.69	6	1.72	7	1.81	6	.53
Teaching Methods	1.62	7	1.74	6	1.69	8	.78
Student Interaction	1.59	8	1.89	5	1.81	7	.02*
Subject Matter Knowledge	1.21	9	1.17	9	1.26	10	.42
Subject Matter Selection	1.12	10	1.14	10	1.32	9	.01*

* Significant at the .05 level of confidence

Table 2

TEACHERS

Perceptions of Teachers' Instructional Problems

Problem Area	Elementary N = 1,241 MD.	Rank	Middle N = 459 MD.	Rank	High N = 597 MD.	Rank	P value
TOP FIVE							
Individual Differences	2.01	1	2.20	2	2.17	2	.03*
Discipline	2.00	2	1.93	3	1.73	3	.01*
Motivation	1.81	3	2.41	1	2.42	1	.01*
Testing, Grading	1.60	4	1.71	4	1.60	4	.30
Instructional Materials	1.45	5	1.51	5	1.55	5	.41
BOTTOM FIVE							
Classroom Management	1.37	6	1.45	7	1.41	8	.36
Teaching Methods	1.35	7	1.43	8	1.45	7	.59
Student Interaction	1.20	8	1.46	6	1.49	6	.03*
Selecting Subject Matter	1.15	9	1.25	9	1.22	9	.41
Subject Matter Knowledge	1.00	10	1.12	10	1.12	10	.27

* Significant at the .05 level of confidence.

Table 3

PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

Perceptions of Teachers' Instructional Problems

Problem Areas	All Teachers N = 2,297 MD.	Rank	All Principals N = 209 MD.	Rank	P value
TOP FIVE					
Motivation	2.42	1	3.32	1	.01*
Individual Differences	2.20	2	2.54	2	.04*
Discipline	2.00	3	2.12	3	.27
Testing, Grading	1.71	4	2.00	4	.03
Instructional Materials	1.55	5	1.81	7	.03
BOTTOM FIVE					
Student Interaction	1.49	6	1.89	6	.02*
Teaching Methods	1.43	7	1.74	8	.03*
Classroom Management	1.40	8	1.98	5	.01*
Selecting Subject Matter	1.15	9	1.12	10	.57
Subject Matter Knowledge	1.10	10	1.17	9	.49

* Significant at the .05 level of confidence.